

Does Decentralisation in Indonesia Give the Poor a Voice?

Evidence from the Purbalingga District

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Abstract: *This study assesses the participation of the poor in village decentralisation in Indonesia, under Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages, through a case study of the Purbalingga District in Central Java Province. The study employs qualitative and descriptive statistical methods, using data collected through observation, questionnaires and interviews. The results indicate that the mechanism established by the Law does not work optimally to enable the poor to participate in the programme. They are less involved in planning; their voices are barely listened to and, consequently, most financed projects are not matched with their needs. Actors, procedures and conditions become the factors hindering participation. Village heads and district officers focus more on administrative reports rather than the quality of participation, while decision-making relies on formal and representative mechanisms that exclude the poor from direct involvement. The unsuccessful distribution of social assistance programmes has been a contributing factor driving the poor to aspire primarily to basic needs programmes. To ensure that decentralisation benefits the poor to the same extent as others, the government should reduce the formality of the village meeting, simplify administration, improve the capacity of village officers and councils, and improve the distribution of social assistance programmes.*

Keywords: Decentralisation; rural development; poverty alleviation; voices of the poor

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1. Introduction

Community participation has become mainstream, not only through programmes to encourage public involvement but also through the broader framework of decentralised governance, whereby authority is devolved to a local level and is thus closer to the community. Local governance can facilitate public participation through community meetings and public

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hearings, as well as daily interaction between the community and local officers (Fatke, 2016; Sutiyo and Maharjan, 2017). Local officers usually understand local problems better than the central government and are thus better able to formulate and implement programmes that address local needs (Cheema and Rondinelli, 2007; Fossati, 2016). Decentralised budgeting allows for more effective use of funds to address poverty and inequalities (Sanogo, 2019).

In Indonesia, the government enacted Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages, with the aim of extending decentralisation to the lowest level of administration. The Law delegated the authority for development planning to local government and guaranteed increased budget allocations to villages. In 2015, each village received an average of IDR 280 million. Allocations were increased to about IDR 800 million in 2018, with the aspiration of having ‘one village, one billion rupiah’ within the near future. This has provided communities with the fiscal capacity to improve basic infrastructure, facilitate economic activities, and accelerate poverty alleviation. The more optimistic see the potential to improve government responses to community problems, provided that increased local resources are complemented by strong financial management, better institutional arrangements and empowered villagers (Antlöv, Watterberg, and Dharmawan, 2016). There is also the potential to strengthen local and customary institutions in order to facilitate community empowerment (Vel and Bedner, 2015). Yet, several studies have raised concerns. There are weaknesses in aspects of the process, such as the method to calculate the grant allocation, the lack of clarity in defining the responsibilities of the village, low administrative capacity and the mechanisms of control (Lewis, 2015). There are also complicated institutional arrangements (Vel and Bedner, 2015), the creation of village elites due to money politics and project brokerages (Aspinall and Rohman, 2017), and little awareness of women’s empowerment and gender issues (Kushandajani and Alfirdaus, 2019).

The poor in Indonesia are mostly landless farmers with a low level of education and few off-farm skills, living in rural areas where a variety of problems affect their livelihood (TNP2K, 2014). For this reason, a ‘one size fits all’ programme cannot meet their needs, and the poor themselves know more about the kind of programmes best suited to their skills and resources. If decentralisation aims to accelerate poverty alleviation, its design and implementation should prioritise the poor. This means the authorities and community respecting the views of poor people, listening to their views, and mainstreaming their needs when budgeting. By doing so, the poor will benefit from decentralisation to the same extent as others in the community.

Various conditions may hamper participation, preventing the poor from benefiting from decentralisation. Lower levels of education may make it difficult for poorer people to drive opinion and have their voices heard. Their

social resources can be constrained because rural institutions are often dominated by local elites, for example, landlords, the wealthier kinships and newly emerging business owners (Aspinall and Rohman, 2017; Sutiyo and Nurdin, 2015). The elites and the more affluent ‘non-poor’ may drive the decision-making out of self-interest. In reality, ‘participation of all stakeholders’ can mean relatively few; primarily the leaders or the representative of particular groups. Some poor people may succeed in contributing ideas, but the village head and community may not listen. Indonesia is a patrimonial society where the leader is typically dominant in decision-making (Antlöv, 1996; Mulder, 1996; Velsink, 1996). Even if the village head is accommodating, there is yet another challenge: in a democratic meeting, every villager – poor or not – has an equal role in decision-making. The very ideology of rural community in Indonesia, with its emphasis on cohesiveness and consensus (Kawamura, 2011), may challenge efforts to prioritise the aspirations of the poor – everybody must get some portion of the benefits, even if not the same for all.

Despite decentralisation’s potential to facilitate participation, in practice, various factors hinder it, especially concerning the participation of the poor. Accounts of participation in the literature often document the experiences of local authorities and community leaders (Kushandajani and Alfirdaus, 2019), and of villagers in general (Alatas, Pritchett, and Wetterberg, 2005; Antlöv et al., 2016; Sutiyo and Maharjan, 2014). However, grassroots realities often differ substantially from the broader claims of a programme’s success (Yang, 2016). For a comprehensive understanding of participation, studies need to investigate both ‘participation of whom?’ and ‘participation in what?’ (Cornwall, 2003; Oakley, 1991; Paul, 1992). This article aims to discuss the experience of the poor in decentralisation by evaluating their needs and the degree to which their voices are heard and translated into budget spending. It systematically establishes an understanding of how and where the ‘voice of the poor’ develops, and the challenges faced. In this context, the poor is defined as households whose income was in the lowest 30% of the population, defined by the Indonesian statistical agency as those who are eligible for benefits from social assistance programmes; this equates to an income of less than USD\$2 purchasing power parity (PPP) per day (TNP2K, 2014).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Empowerment, Decentralisation, Participation

Empowerment, the process of enabling people to control their own lives, can occur on either an individual or group level (Narayan, 2002). At the community level, it aims to create a more balanced distribution of power and

control of resources (Alsop and Heinsohn, 2005; Narayan, 2002). In the case of developing countries, empowerment implies poor and marginal groups improving their living conditions, by identifying and designing solutions and making a transition from lacking to having capability (Steiner and Farmer, 2018; Todaro and Smith, 2012; Willis, 2011). Empowerment of this kind overcomes various weaknesses of growth-oriented economic policies, which have failed to alleviate poverty and reduce inequalities (Todaro and Smith, 2012; Willis, 2011).

A system of decentralisation, in which central government transfers power, tasks and resources to local governments (Cheema and Rondinelli, 2007), has been the modality to empower a community. It functions as a political structure to increase participation. A smaller, local administration facilitates a greater sense of involvement from residents; debating local issues is more attractive to citizens and increases their opportunity for participation (Spina, 2014). Local administration allows for public interaction in various activities of governance. It facilitates political education, whereby the poor can learn the civic skills and gain competency in public meetings of a more demanding kind (Fatke, 2016).

Participation takes places in every stage of a programme: planning, implementation and evaluation (Oakley, 1991; Steiner and Farmer, 2018). People whose lives are going to be changed by a programme should have a say in what that change will be, and how it will take place (Yang, 2016). Bottom-up planning and direct involvement of the community in setting the development agenda is needed to create a higher satisfaction with outcomes. A comparative study of representative-based meetings versus direct plebiscites found that plebiscites resulted in community members having a higher satisfaction, increased knowledge of the projects, perceiving greater benefits, as well as a higher reported willingness to contribute (Olken, 2010). However, having a community presence simply as a 'rubber stamp' exercise does not equate to participation. Self-awareness, instead of external inducement, is required for the long-term success of participatory development (Kvartiuk and Curtiss, 2019; Yang, 2016).

Development programmes are linked to financial resources, a fact that inevitably generates various interests concerning who might stand to gain or lose (Yang, 2016). Here, the concept of voice becomes very important to understand who participates and who benefits. Voice, in this sense, means the degree to which a person can influence decisions and outcomes through various forms of participation (Cornwall, 2003; Paul, 1992). Participatory development philosophically aims to provide space for less vocal and powerful groups to exercise their voice and make choices in decision-making (Cornwall, 2003). The poor are the group whose voice should be prioritised. Their choices may cover various actions that could improve their livelihoods; thus, the government should not narrow the scope of rural development. It

should instead include multi-sectoral programmes covering not only agriculture but also infrastructure, microfinance, environment, human resources and many other areas that can improve the quality of life (Sutiyo and Maharjan, 2017). Listening to the poor can result in a better understanding of their needs.

The importance of the participation of the poor is presented in studies on the Saemaul Undong programme in South Korea (Yang, 2016), community-based development in Ukraine (Kvartiuk and Curtiss, 2019) and the Capacity for Change programme in Scotland (Steiner and Farmer, 2018). An evaluation of a self-help programme in India demonstrates that the involvement of the poor is key to accelerating poverty alleviation (Desai and Joshi, 2013). Not only developing countries but also in more advanced ones such as Malaysia, poverty reduction should involve the poor by increasing their ownership and control within development programmes, so developing their capacity and institutions (Nair and Sagar, 2017).

The determinants of participation are classified into three groups: (1) individual-level factors, such as age, education, income, landholdings; (2) community-level factors, such as leadership and social capital; and (3) system-level factors, such as economic conditions, electoral system and the design of decentralisation (Spina, 2014). Challenges to increase participation are crosscutting issues of politics, social and cultures. Politically, the voices of the poor can be bought or manipulated due to their economic dependency (Aspinall and Rohman, 2017). Poor people may avoid raising criticism because this may create conflicts and backlash (Sutiyo and Maharjan, 2014). Socially, active participation requires motivation and competences (Fatke, 2016), but there are some limits to poor people's ability to understand empowerment programmes (Steiner and Farmer, 2018). Poverty itself has a debilitating effect on participation due to low education, health and physical constraints (Johnson, 2001). Culturally, the poor and marginal groups are often burdened by the various stigma that separates them from the community and prevents their opportunity to be heard (Cornwall, 2003; Mokhtar and Mustafa, 2015). Even a quota system does not assure active participation, due to unsupportive cultural factors (Kalaramadam, 2018). Moreover, participation is not a quick process, whereas many programmes are trapped in the so-called development industry, with its emphasis on rapid and quantifiable results rather than addressing deep-rooted problems (Willis, 2011).

Elevating the voice of the poor requires a mechanism that addresses these interrelated challenges. Community leadership is decisive in ensuring participation in the whole process of development (Yang, 2016). A successful programme requires both good momentum and suitable conditions. Recent experience from Vietnam found that the enabling conditions of good governance and institutional support, working hand-in-

hand with contextual factors, created a favourable impact (Cheong, 2017). Decentralisation will succeed in alleviating poverty only if the poor actively participate, social capital is strong, local institutions have enough capacity, and the budget expenditure explicitly addresses the needs of the poor. Conversely, if the poor cannot participate, social capital does not exist, local institutions do not have enough capacity and budgeting becomes just a formality, then decentralisation will fail (Sutiyo and Maharjan, 2017).

2.2 Villages in Indonesia

The village is the lowest level of government administration in Indonesia, after the province and district government. In Java, a village usually has an area of two to ten square kilometres with a population of several thousand. At root, cohesiveness is a fundamental value of community interaction (Kawamura, 2011). Common interest is valued higher than an individual, and public decision-making is careful to ensure that everybody gets some benefit. People are usually reluctant to protest openly for the sake of social harmony. A patrimonial system places the village head as the father of the community, to be followed obediently (Antlöv, 1996; Mulder, 1996; Velsink, 1996). Various institutions exist within the village. Sutiyo and Maharjan (2017) found 14 different groups within a single village, with each household being an active member and attended the periodic meetings of at least one or two. In recent decades, however, changes have taken place, in conjunction with democratisation and reform at the national level. The power distribution has been reconfigured with the establishment of the local council and the emergence of new elites from educated villagers and small business owners (Antlöv, 2003; Bebbington et al., 2004). Some villagers have been brave enough to complain and openly protest to the village authorities (Alatas et al., 2005). Direct election of a village head means both candidates and incumbent will try harder to satisfy the proposals of the majority as well as buying the voice of the villagers (Aspinall and Rohman, 2017).

Despite their tradition of maintaining harmony, poverty is located disproportionately in villages. Based on a national poverty line at US\$ 1.56 PPP, the number of poor people in Indonesia in 2018 constituted approximately 26 million. If the line is set at US\$ 2 PPP, the standard set by The World Bank, this increases substantially to 99 million (TNP2K, 2014). The remaining poor are those who have not benefited from the Green Revolution of the 1950s and 60s or the various state-led programmes massively implemented during the 1980s. These are mostly farmers whose landholding is less than 0.5 Ha. These profiles show not only the complexity but also the economic vulnerability of the population. Recent efforts in poverty alleviation relied on small-scale programmes to address specific local issues. Within the national poverty reduction strategy, this mainly

consisted of social assistance and empowerment of the poor, aiming to deal with various dimensions of well-being, such as income, education, health, social inclusion and political participation (TNP2K, 2014). As deprivation and inequalities vary across regions, the strategy is executed within the framework of decentralisation. Law No. 23 of 2014 on Local Governance delegated provision of public services to the district government, while Law No. 6 of 2014 transferred authority on small-scale development to village government.

The village is the intended locus for the initiation and implementation of local programmes. Law No. 6 of 2014 guarantees the power of the village to initiate local programmes and to manage home affairs, free of external intervention. Institutionally, it is local self-government led by an elected head, with some accompanying administrative staff. There is an elected council with a membership of 5 to 10 people. The council's task is to identify aspirations and proposals from the community, to represent the community in decision-making, and to supervise the village head. The relative autonomy of village government gives it the ability to confront the higher government with stronger political bargaining power (Antlöv et al., 2016). The Law establishes a mechanism to involve as many stakeholders as possible in village governance. Development planning should involve the village head, council, and representation from various groups, including religious and traditional figures, farming, women and the poor.¹ The emphasis is on achieving consensus; where this is not possible, there is an option to hold a vote. Spending is made to improve quality of life and address poverty alleviation, prioritising the provision of basic needs, physical infrastructure development, local economic activities and sustainable utilisation of natural resources.² These mechanisms and the guidance on spending are officially authorised in order to aid community empowerment, and change the paradigm of centralisation in rural development programmes.

Procedurally, there are three primary stages implemented within the year: development planning, programme execution, and programme evaluation. Within each stage, opportunities for the poor to participate are identified.

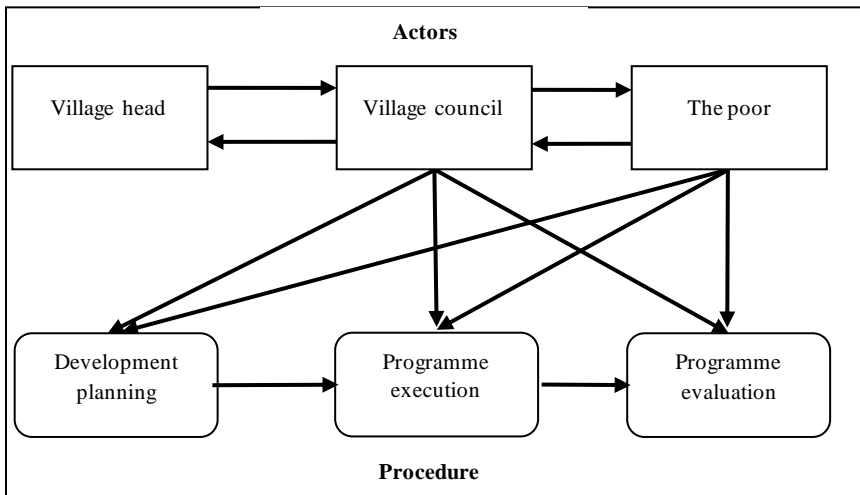
- In development planning, important decisions have to be made in a public meeting involving the village head, council and representatives of various community groups. Decisions are consensus-based, and district officers and outsiders cannot intervene in the process. Opportunities for the poor to raise their views are guaranteed by the Law, which stipulates that representatives from this group must be at the village meeting.
- In programme execution, village officers will carry out the selected programmes. They are responsible for making detailed budget

calculations, spending the money and compiling administrative as well as financial reports. The reports are submitted to the district office three times in a year. Opportunities for the poor to be involved in this stage are via a paid worker or through voluntarily contributing material, labour and cash to the programme.

- In the programme evaluation stage, district officers are required to investigate the outputs of the projects. A final report has to be submitted to the district offices and presented to the council. The council and district officers perform a formal evaluation. The village head is required to post information on a public notice board to promote transparency and accountability to the community.

The mechanism of participation can be mapped from linkages between the actors and procedures involved. These, and the opportunities for the poor to participate, can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Established Mechanisms for the Participation of the Poor

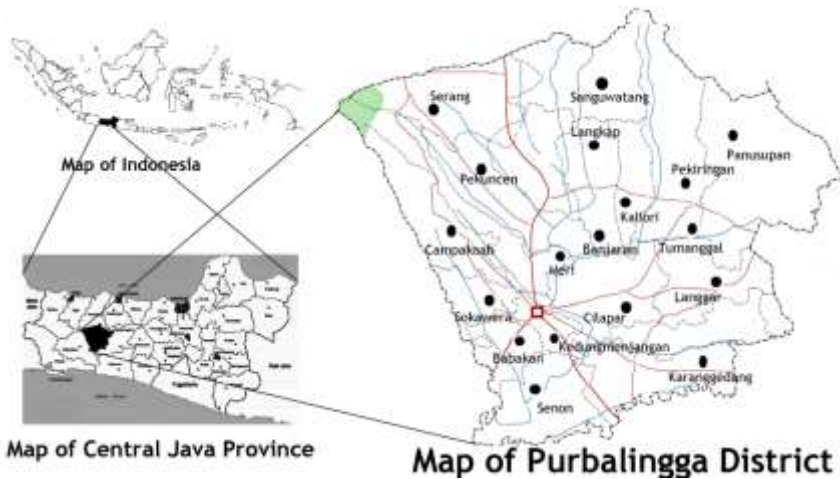


3. Methods

Since most of the poor in Indonesia live on Java Island, this study purposively chose the context of Javanese society to understand the nature of their participation. The focus is specifically on Purbalingga District, one of the most impoverished areas in Central Java Province. It is an agricultural region, where farmers mostly plant paddy, corn and cassava. It is relatively far away from urban areas and the main road of Trans-Java. The

inaccessibility of the district hindered its economic growth, and industry, as well as tourism, still lags behind the rest of the country. Agriculture is the backbone of its economy, accounting for 34% of the local Gross Domestic Product. In the district, the programme for empowering community by grants transfer to the village has been operational since 2005 and is formalised in various development planning documents. However, despite these initiatives, poverty remains a problem, and the district is always ranked lowest within the province. The high rate of poverty, the predominantly rural area, and – despite the existence of various initiatives – a failure to decrease the number of the poor are conditions that help to understand the absence of the voice of the poor in decentralisation. The district is administratively divided into 18 subdistricts and 239 villages. One village from each subdistrict was selected to be a study site (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Map of Purbalingga District showing the study sites (as black dots): Kedungmenjangan; Babakan; Senon; Karanggedang; Langgar; Tumanggal; Cilapar; Sokawera; Meri; Banjaran; Campakoah; Pakuncen; Kaliori; Langkap; Serang; Sanguwatang; Pekiringan; and Panusupan



As of 2015, there were 269,879 households in the district. An enumeration of various indicators of dwelling conditions has been conducted and resulted in a list of 100,281 households whose income was the lowest 30% of the population, or less than US\$ 2 PPP per day (TNP2K, 2014). The respondents for this study came from this group. Data were accessed from the Unified Database of Poverty available in the local planning office. Prior permission was obtained from the government to access these confidential data. To comply with the required research ethics, pseudonyms are used throughout this article, and no personal data are identified.

Data were collected through three main steps. Firstly, development planning documents from all 239 villages in the district were investigated to understand general information concerning budget utilisation. Secondly, 18 villages within the district were purposively selected; 36 poor households were randomly selected from each of these, giving a total sample of 648 poor households. Fieldwork was conducted over two months, in July and August 2015, using 18 trained enumerators to distribute questionnaires. Thirdly, participatory observation and in-depth interview of representatives from the poor, the officers, and the councils were conducted by the first author, to obtain more information.

Efforts were made to apply some quantitative techniques, but without significant results. This may be due to the socio-economic conditions of respondents being quite homogeneous, all coming from the group defined as poor. For this reason, we placed more emphasis on descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis of interviews and observations. Drawing on both the experiential narratives of the poor and opinions expressed by local officers, we tried to capture as far as possible the grassroots realities of decentralisation.

4. Results

4.1 Socio-economic Conditions of the Study Sites and Respondents

The respondents in this study are household heads, mostly male (89%), aged between 41–50 years (31%) and with an elementary level of education (52%). Most worked in agriculture (30%), with landholding of less than 0.5 Ha (97%). Although they were all listed as poor entitled to social assistance from the government, some did not receive it. Of those responding, 97% were beneficiaries of the Programme of Subsidised Rice for the Poor, 93% were beneficiaries of the Programme of Health Insurance for the Poor, about 75% were beneficiaries of the Programme of Conditional Cash Transfer, and 20% were beneficiaries of the Programme of Unconditional Cash Transfer (Table 1).

Those profiles may relate to many aspects of participation and rural development. The fact that 11% of household heads were female indicates a cultural barrier of involvement, as women are often less prioritised in decision-making. The low level of education presents a challenge, hindering the ability to generate ideas and control the programme. The limited size of landholding, mostly less than 0.5 Ha, indicates a need for programmes that look beyond agriculture to improve income. Since not all respondents received social assistance, they were more vulnerable to economic shocks. New alternatives that provide income sources suitable for these socio-economic conditions are needed.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents (Household Heads)

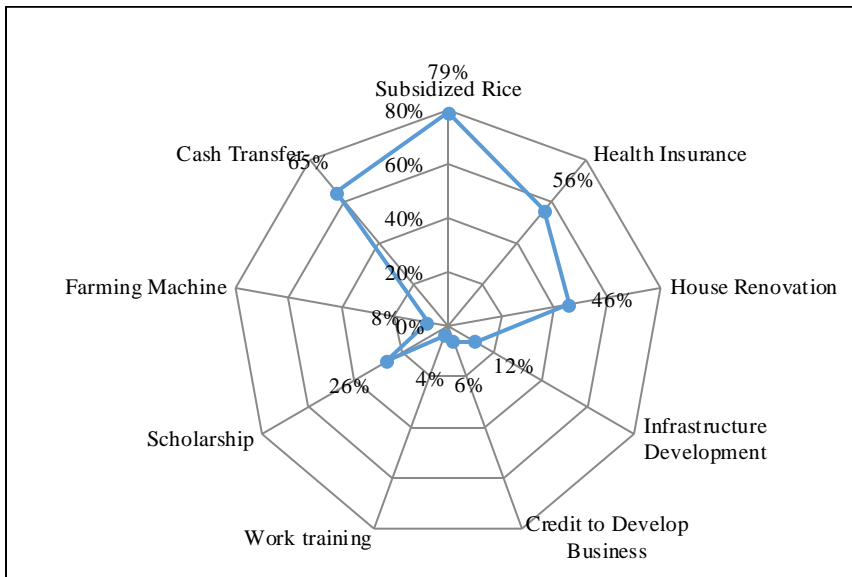
Socio-economic conditions	No.	%
Gender		
Male	577	89
Female	71	11
Age		
≤30 years old	14	2
31–40 years old	97	15
41–50 years old	200	31
51–60 years old	150	23
61–70 years old	105	16
≥71 years old	82	13
Education level		
No formal education	274	42
Elementary School	335	52
Junior High School	35	5
Senior High School	4	1
Occupation		
Agriculture	250	39
Labour	203	31
Business	52	8
Service	24	4
Other	95	15
Cropland ownership		
< 0.5 Ha	629	97
≥ 0.5 Ha	19	3
Beneficiary of Social Assistance Programme		
Subsidised Rice for the Poor (<i>Raskin</i>)	627	97
Health Insurance for the Poor (<i>Jamkesmas</i>)	605	93
Conditional Cash Transfer (<i>Bantuan Langsung Tunai</i>)	484	75
Unconditional Cash Transfer (<i>Programme Keluarga Harapan</i>)	128	20

Source: Field Survey, 2015

4.2 Needs of the Poor

When the respondents were asked to identify the three programmes regarded as most needed to improve their living conditions, most indicated social assistance programmes. Ranked from highest to the lowest, their choices were the provision of staple foods, cash transfer, health insurance, house reparation, scholarship, infrastructure development, farming machinery, credit to develop business, and skills training (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Programmes Identified by Respondents as Most Needed to Improve Living Conditions



Source: Field Survey, 2015

Most respondents initially cited the need for more income generation, but they were not able to explain what this might entail in detail and simply wanted the government to provide jobs. Subsequently, programmes to reduce financial burdens were requested, which included various social assistances explicitly linked to livelihood difficulties. They focused mostly on programmes that provided direct benefits in the short-term, such as subsidised rice, health services or cash transfer. Infrastructure development was ranked as the sixth priority, with only 12% of respondents selecting it. These were mostly beyond the thinking of village heads, and many of the hoped-for programmes were not covered in the spending of the village.

One respondent, a 43-year-old landless farmer, communicated his need to improve his income:

Our income is not sufficient. It is just enough to buy rice and vegetable. If we are sick, there is no money to go to doctor. I am also often confused [*bingung*] if my son needs money for school fees. I want the government to provide job for me, whatever jobs, as far as I can earn money... I ever told to the village head, but no clear answer is given. Just a promise... I propose, if he cannot help us to get job,

then he has to help us so that we received the programmes of subsidised rice and other properly (Mr. T. Y., 27 August 2015).

The respondents were able to identify their needs from appreciating the gap between their current living conditions and their desire for a better situation. Whether their proposals would be able to alleviate poverty effectively remains in question. Most respondents were not in a position to think in detail and come up with creative ideas for income generation, so long as their basic needs were not being met. Only if the necessities were well provided, would they be able to go on to discuss empowerment programmes. In the study sites, social assistance programmes were implemented by the central government through various programmes, which included subsidised rice, health insurance for the poor, scholarship for the poor student, conditional cash transfer and unconditional cash transfer. However, there were problems with distribution, with some respondents not receiving assistance due to errors in registration. These errors remained, without an apparent means to solve them. The inability of the government to deliver social assistances contextually framed the choices of the poor.

4.3 Utilisation of the Village Budget

Based on the study of budget documentation from the 239 villages in the district, the most significant expenditure was on building or maintaining physical infrastructures such as roads and irrigation canals. All villages in the district had this kind of spending on their list. A more in-depth investigation of documents relating specifically to medium-term village planning found that physical infrastructures would still be a priority in the next couple of years.

Only a few villages spent on community empowerment activities, such as training or the establishment of enterprises. None had succeeded in establishing enterprises in either on-farm or off-farm activities. The most common type of enterprise was microfinance, in which villages allocated fund to supplement existing capital. Some 32% of villages had invested in microfinance, with budgets on average less than IDR 10 million. Some villages targeted the poor, but the fund was quite small. For example, 51% of villages had projects to repair houses, but usually less than five houses per village with a budget of about IDR 2 to 5 million per house. Around 31% of villages financed scholarships and 10% provided cash transfers for the poor, orphans, the elderly or disabled. Cash transfer and scholarship are usually a small part of the budget; for example, a charity of IDR 1 million for ten orphans, equally distributed (Table 2).

Table 2: Utilisation of the budget among 239 villages in Purbalingga District, 2015

Type of programmes	No. spending on each programme	%
Physical infrastructures	239	100
Cash transfer	24	10
Scholarship	73	31
House repair/renovation	121	51
Microfinance development	76	32

Source: Database of the budget from 239 villages, 2015

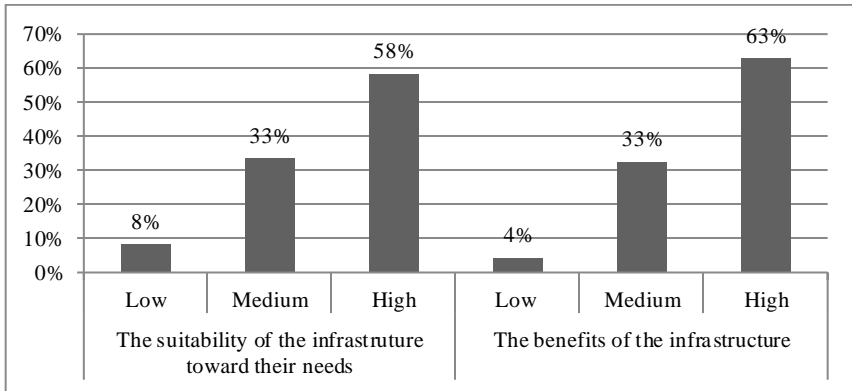
The prioritisation of physical infrastructure was due to three causes. Firstly, the villages lacked the initiative to formulate new programmes. Because infrastructure damage was the most common and identifiable problem in rural areas, it naturally became the priority. Secondly, there was a bias in understanding the meaning of development. The word for ‘to develop’ in Indonesia is *membangun*, which is similar in meaning to ‘to build’. To build infrastructures thus became the development vision of village heads and many community members, rather than a desire to empower the community. Thirdly, the focus on physical infrastructure is related to the low involvement of the poor in decision-making. Because the poor are rarely involved, there is a limited understanding of their needs in terms of development.

One village head explained the justification to prioritise physical infrastructures as follows:

Yes, indeed most of us prioritise physical infrastructures building [rather] than community empowerment. This is because our community needs that. Please come to my village, you will be welcomed by damaged roads. This is not only my decision, but also the decision of local councils and many others in the meeting. Maybe, in the future, after all infrastructures are repaired, we can focus more on establishing enterprises or training for the villagers (Mr. S. A. N., interviewed 23 August 2015).

The decision to prioritise infrastructure development is also motivated by the common understanding that it benefits all community members, unlike social assistance spending, from which only the poor benefit. While most respondents evaluated the suitability and benefits of infrastructure as highly important, a substantial proportion only evaluated them as moderately so. It can be assumed that physical infrastructure development may benefit the poor, but possibly not as much as other options, and not as much as they anticipated (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Respondents' perception of the benefits from physical infrastructure development



In many cases, spending for community empowerment and social assistance for the poor was not an initiative of village heads. However, it resulted from district offers providing advice and persuasion to allocate funds not only for physical infrastructures but also non-physical development. An officer in the District Planning Agency in charge of screening proposals from villages stated:

We already very often remind [*mengingatkan*] village heads that the meaning of development was not only to build infrastructures. There are many types of development that are really needed by the villagers, for example, training for the youth, establishment of cooperative or enterprises, and scholarship for poor student. However, seemingly, it does not change much. Still, in all proposals of the village, the infrastructure building is dominating (Mr. D. N., 21 August 2015).

Several efforts were made to improve village heads' awareness of the need to provide opportunities for community empowerment. Coordination meetings were set up in the initial years before village planning, involving the district head, local agencies and village heads. A letter of invitation from the district head was issued and distributed to all villages. However, all decisions were in the hands of village heads and councils because, by regulation, they were the ones with the power to decide on spending matters.

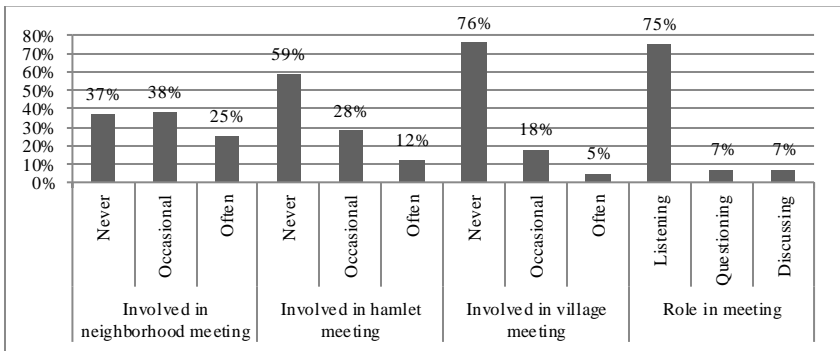
4.4 Voicing Needs

Before 2015, the study villages had managed a budget ranging from IDR 200 million to 400 million a year. The amount was doubled in 2015 and tripled

in 2017. Based on the regulation,³ grants could be spent on two types of projects: (1) basic physical infrastructure, such as roads, irrigation canals, clean water facilities, clinics, and preschool building; (2) community empowerment, such as training and the establishment of commonly managed enterprises to help people to expand their business and earn additional income. The management of the grants incorporated three stages: planning in January; execution thereafter; report and evaluation in December.

Planning meetings to decide grant use were conducted in January through a forum involving various groups within the village. This was hierarchically conducted from the lowest level, neighbourhood, continuing to hamlet and village level. According to one village officer, the planning meetings since 2015 had been more interesting and dynamic, and people were more enthusiastic, the reason being the availability of the grants. People could now initiate and finance a programme from the budget, instead of only proposing it to the higher administration.⁴ However, there was the matter of who came to the meeting. Only 5% of respondents in this study were often invited to the village meeting, meaning that most had been excluded from decision-making. A larger number of attendees were from the non-poor. Study of the budget reports indicated that the number of attendees at a village meeting ranged from 20 to 30. The village officers, councils, heads of neighbourhood groups and some heads of farmer groups comprised the majority of these. Twenty-five percent of respondents, the highest involvement rate, had been invited to neighbourhood meetings aimed at identifying the proposals from the community. Those who had been invited to these meetings said they were listeners, rarely raising questions or being actively involved in the discussion. The final decision was made in the village meeting, where most respondents were not involved (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Respondent’s Involvement in Planning Meeting

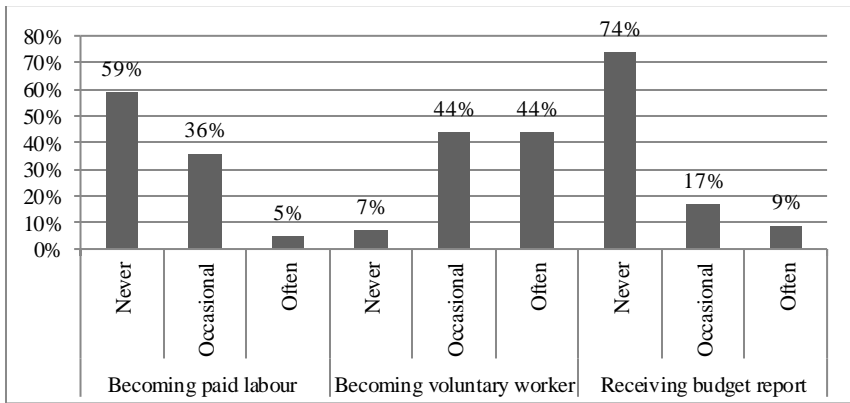


According to the regulation, the poor need to be represented in a village meeting. Despite this, village heads often undervalued the importance of the presence of the poor in the meeting. Most felt that the most important thing was the presence of the councils, in that once the head of the council was willing to sign the planning documents, the decision was legitimated. Representation did not work for the poor, as most respondents felt distant from the councils and rarely interacted with them. There was no regular forum or efforts by the council to identify the needs of the community. Some respondents did not even know the name of their councils. Poor people had minimal opportunity to deliver their views directly and did not know they had the right to be involved in decision-making. They tended to trust proposals to the neighbourhood heads.

One respondent illustrated his lack of opportunity to be involved in decision-making:

Here, there are some community groups, but I did not join any of them. Yes [*ya*]..., farmer group is active, every month it has a meeting. However, what I join the group for, if I have no cropland? The only group I join with is recital [*pengajian*] group... It never discusses rural development (Mr. R. B. N., 20 August 2015).

In the programme execution stage, the involvement of the respondents presented mixed results. It was low in paid activities but moderate in voluntary ones. In infrastructure development, most respondents (59%) never became paid workers because the projects only employed skilled masons. They often voluntarily contributed labour, material, snacks and drinks during project execution. In the programme evaluation stage, most respondents (74%) had not received any reports about the programme. They had not been informed about the utilisation of funds and did not know the increases in the budget since 2015. Accountability was weak because village heads were not used to explaining their spending to the community. There were opportunities to deliver the report in informal meetings with villagers but, again, it depended on the willingness of the village head. The village head was only required to submit the report to the council and the district officer. The public notice board was in the village office, but the content was not updated (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Involvement in Programme Execution and Evaluation

One case of active involvement of the poor was due to an initiative by a village head. In the village of Serang, the village head had invited about 80 participants from various groups and neighbourhoods to a meeting at the village office. A substantial number of poor people and women came in to discuss the utilisation of the budget. They were informed of the amount of the budget and given the opportunity to propose programmes. The meeting discussed proposals to decide on a list of programmes. The village head had intentionally facilitated an open meeting in order to hear the voices of the villagers so that they could create a programme that benefited all. This process substantially increased the understanding and satisfaction of participants, even when the decision did not favour them. While it does not mean that the poor were prioritised, direct involvement of this kind can be a way to improve knowledge and awareness and provide the experience of speaking up in a meeting. Another case of enabling voices to be heard in programme evaluation was found in the village of Banjaran. Here, the village head had been accused of embezzling funds. The villagers protested and brought the case to court. This was not a case where the poor had organised themselves; rather, they were involved as part of the community seeking accountability on the use of funding. Other than these two cases, no prominent cases were found in the other villages. In most situations, there was a similar pattern of less involvement in planning and evaluation and more in project execution. Decentralisation to the village-level government was still unable to provide more space for poor people to be involved in decision-making so that their voices could be heard and prioritised when budgeting.

4.5 Barriers to Participation

The main concern of district officers was whether the budget could be administered per the regulation. For them, successful implementation meant that planning, fund disbursement and the report were on time and the report and receipts were in the designated format. Their emphasis was on administration rather than participation. As a result, their efforts to facilitate decentralisation placed more emphasis on training for village officers to complete the various planning documents and reports and use the budgeting software. Supervision visits were made to check the documents from the village.⁵

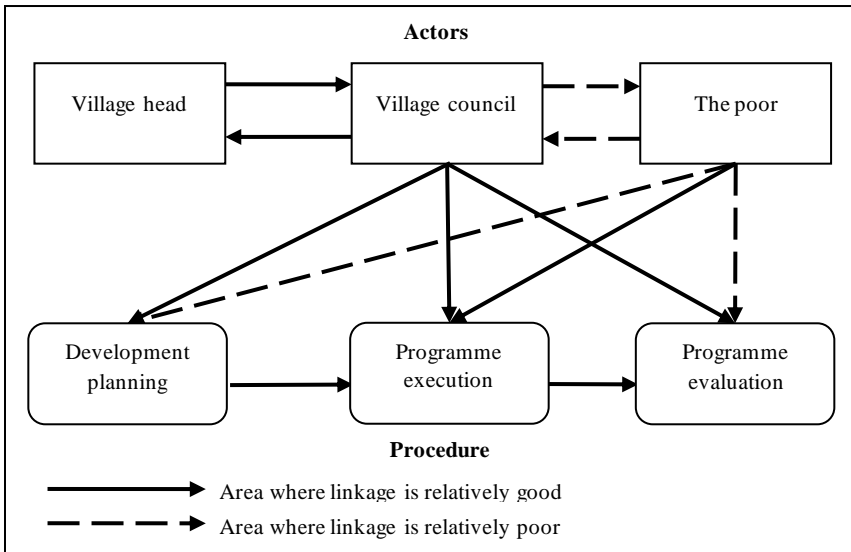
Similar to the district officers, the village heads were more concerned with the timeliness of projects and the various attachments to reports, rather than the quality of participation. They had limited awareness that decentralisation should prioritise the proposals and needs of the poor. A good road, functioning irrigation, representative office and various other infrastructure improvements remained the development vision of village heads, and this constituted the legacy they wanted to create through the grants. They mostly used consensus from the planning meeting as their reference point, providing it did not conflict with the district regulation. They were less concerned as to who attended the meeting; whether it was taken over by the elites, the non-poor or other interests; or how the decision was made. When asked about the participation of the poor, their answer was simply a statement questioning the ability of the poor to participate, formulate programmes or understand the decisions they might make. Indeed, some village heads were of the view that the only agreement they needed was from the council, whose signature was required for the budget document. When signing the document, district officers never asked who attended the meeting and whether it was representative or not. There was no mechanism to ensure that the council worked properly to identify the proposal from the community, and many of the poor did not even know about the councils.

The poor could not influence decision-making significantly. Even if they came to the meeting, their role was mostly just to listen. Decentralisation in Indonesia was more a top-down process, meaning that the state had designed the system and regulated the ways to execute it. It had not arisen as the result of self-awareness and mobilisation from a community demanding more space for involvement and control. For the poor, even if they had a proposal, such as a social assistance programme, they did not openly propose it and preferred to be a listener in the meeting. They would not participate unless this space was provided by the regulation.

5. Discussion

Decentralisation to the lowest level of administration provides more means of public participation, but not for the poor. Narratives and experiences of the poor indicate that they are less involved in decision-making, their voices are hardly listened to, and their needs are hardly prioritised when budgeting. Since decentralisation began, mechanisms for their participation have not worked, meaning it cannot offer a route for empowerment. There have been no efforts to define the problems of the poor and formulate solutions. In decentralisation, the local issues that attract the attention of the community are not those issues that address the needs of the poor. Their needs cannot be voiced and brought to public attention in planning meetings. Their participation is generally low, especially in development planning and programme evaluation. Consequently, development outputs are not matched to the needs of the poor. Those areas where participation is good, and vice versa, can be seen in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Mechanisms of participation in the study site



While the poor aspire more for social assistance and programmes dealing with the problems of their daily livelihoods, the village government devotes more expenditure to infrastructure building, where the impact on poverty cannot be identified in the short-term. The voice of the poor is hardly heard in village decentralisation, and the potential benefits of decentralisation and participation to accelerate poverty alleviation are some

way from being realised.

This case study indicates that many concerns previously raised by the literature concerning the locally complex conditions hindering full participation (Antlöv et al., 2016; Aspinall and Rohman, 2017; Lewis, 2015; Sutiyo and Maharjan, 2017; Vel and Bedner, 2015) are ongoing. The design of decentralisation, as based on Law No. 6 of 2014, does not automatically improve the inclusiveness of decision-making or the responsiveness of the government to the needs of the poor. It cannot empower the community by making power distribution equal. Consequently, the objective of decentralisation, to reduce inequalities and overcome various weaknesses of growth-oriented policies (Todaro and Smith, 2012; Willis, 2011), is still far from being achieved.

The poor cannot participate effectively, especially in decision-making and programme evaluation. Involvement in the planning stage is seen as the most influential since it is related to decisions on who gains and who loses out on the benefits. In the sites in this study, various system-level and community-level factors hampered the participation of the poor. The main structure of village government, as well as mechanisms to participate, did not work optimally. Village decentralisation faced challenges that included a lack understanding of village heads and district officers concerning the nature of genuine participation, a lack of creativity from village officers when formulating programmes, and the ineffectiveness of village councils in hearing the needs of the poor. Socially, there was limited institutional membership of village groups by the poor, as well as minimal communication with the local council, both of which hindered their opportunities to participate. Furthermore, the problematic distribution of various social assistance programmes was an important context in which the poor were psychologically more focused on obtaining their immediate basic needs than proposing a programme that had a long-term impact on income generation. Culturally, the village heads are too dominant in decision-making. Consequently, mechanisms for participation provided only limited opportunities for the poor and, even then, were not always followed correctly. There was a lack of monitoring regarding the implementation of the law. A rigid administration system when it came to the budget meant that the officers focused more on these formalities rather than the quality of participation itself.

Efforts to improve opportunities for the voices of the poor to be heard consider the factors of actors, procedures and conditions. There is a need to improve the capacity of the village officers to identify the problems and potentialities of their villages as well as to formulate the programmes beyond physical infrastructures. In addition, although the law emphasises the role of village actors in implementation, the importance of the higher levels of government should not be underestimated. Assistance and facilitation from

outside, mainly district government, is needed to ensure that the money is spent to meet the needs of the poor. Currently, there is a tendency to rely only on representation from the village council. However, the village council does not have a good record when it comes to listening to the voices of poor people; the poor need to be present, and heard, in the village meeting. This could be enabled by reducing the formality of decision-making and simplifying administration. The presence of the poor should be made obligatory, for instance, through a required quota system in the planning meeting and in the allotment of spending. Only with this structural guarantee will poor people have the opportunity to express their needs and benefit from decentralisation to the same extent as other groups. Time efficiency may be decreased, but it will produce a more inclusive development. Enabling the conditions needed is the responsibility of the district and central government. As found here, the poor currently tend to express a desire for basic needs programmes because many of them are not given social assistance programmes, even though they are entitled to the benefits. Effective distribution of the programmes is a prerequisite to the successful implementation of village decentralisation.

6. Conclusion

This study indicates that addressing the needs of the poor entails the provision of basic needs and easing of daily problems in relation to their livelihoods. However, the poor were less involved in decision-making, their voice was not prioritised, and their needs received little attention from the authorities and communities. The poor were still not able to realise their aspirations and influence decision-making to improve their lives. Consequently, budget spending decisions did not match their needs, and decentralisation had benefited them less than it had others.

The involvement of the poor at the development planning stage is most influential in ensuring that decentralisation provides the benefits they need. Particular challenges at this stage include the combination of actors, procedures and conditions that work against improving the participation of the poor. To ensure that decentralisation benefits the poor to the same extent as others, the government is recommended to reduce the formality of village meeting, simplify administration, improve the capacity of village officers and councils to formulate methods of empowerment, strengthen monitoring of the Law's implementation and improve the distribution of social assistance programmes. Given that most current budget expenditure is on infrastructure building (mainly, roads), the impact of this spending on poverty alleviation may not be identifiable soon. Whether better infrastructure creates more job opportunity and income sources for the poor remains unanswered and would require further study. A lesson learned from

the case of the Purbalingga District is that transferring grants to the local community and decentralising programmes to the lowest administration are not sufficient to allow poor people to participate and make their voices heard. The design should ensure space for the poor to articulate their needs and, if needed, a quota system to guarantee their involvement in decision-making and in getting the allotment of funds for their needs. This needs to be accompanied by capacity development for local institutions, a reduction of administration in programmes, and the provision and monitoring of environments that enable policy implementation.

Notes

1. Ministerial regulation of village 2/2015 on the guide to village decision-making.
2. Ministerial regulation of village 5/2015 on the priority of grants utilisation.
3. Ministerial regulation of village 5/2015 on the priority of grants utilisation.
4. Interview with the village officer of Langgar, 30 July 2015.
5. Interpreted from interviews with district officers (Mr. D. N., Mr T. P. R., Mr. M. S.), 25 August 2015.

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